

# BRISTOL AND BURKE

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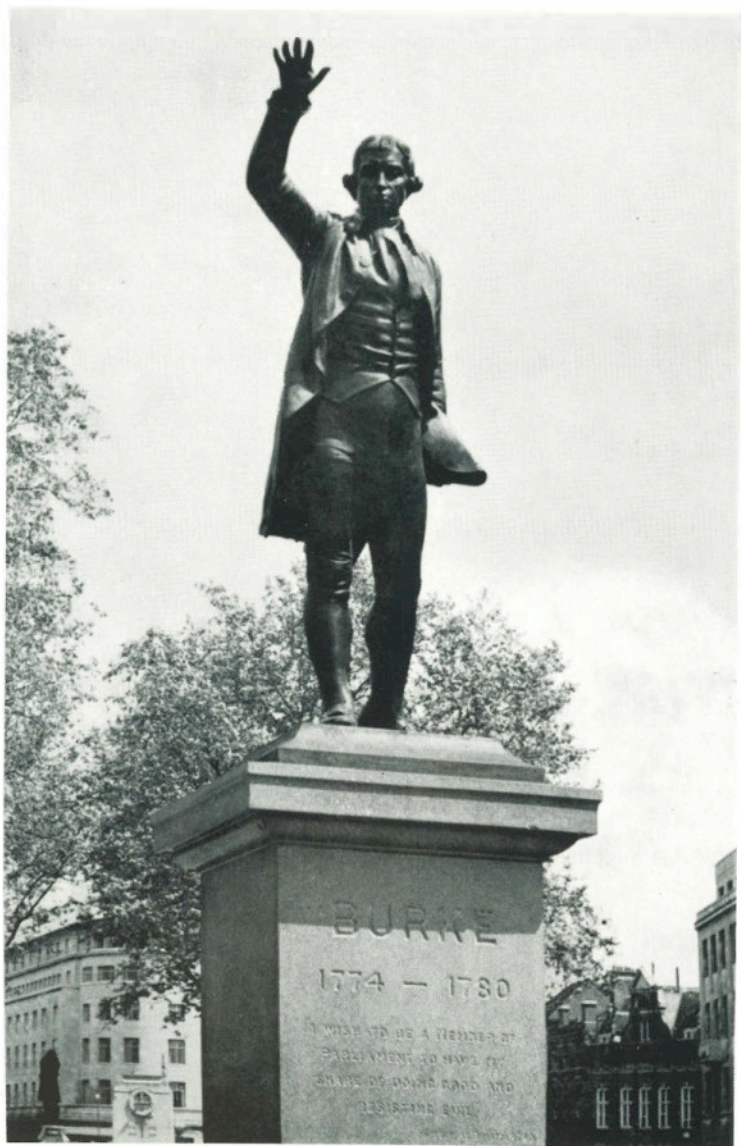
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I wish to be a Member of Parliament  
to have my share of doing good and  
resisting evil.

Speech at Bristol, 1780.



Burke's statue in Colston Avenue, Bristol. It is a bronze replica of the original in the Houses of Parliament and was given by Sir W. H. Wills to mark the opening of the new St. Augustine's Bridge.

Photograph by Reece Winstone

# BRISTOL AND BURKE

BY P. T. UNDERDOWN, M.A., Ph.D.

On 30 October 1894 a statue of Edmund Burke was unveiled in Bristol by the then Prime Minister, Lord Rosebery. In recognition of the occasion, G. E. Weare published **Edmund Burke's Connection with Bristol**, a study mainly concerned with the election of 1774 but giving only a short account of Burke's work as member of Parliament for the city during the ensuing six years. Since Weare's book appeared, our understanding of eighteenth century politics has been transformed as a result of the researches of Sir Lewis Namier and other modern historians. A number of collections of manuscripts have also become available to scholars, including the Fitzwilliam papers which were removed from Wentworth Woodhouse in 1948 and housed in Sheffield Public Library. These contain many previously unknown letters to and from Burke, and together with letters from smaller manuscript collections elsewhere, they have made possible a revision and amplification of Weare's book.

The six years 1774-80 during which Burke represented Bristol in Parliament constituted only a short chapter in his public career which extended over thirty years. He had previously sat at Westminster for Lord Verney's pocket borough of Wendover from 1765 to 1774; Lord Rockingham subsequently found him a seat for Malton which he represented from 1780 until his retirement in 1794. Burke was a professional politician. By 1774, he was not only the most distinguished speaker in the House of Commons, but he also acted as an unpaid agent for the Rockingham party in its negotiations with other political groups as well as in internal consultations amongst its own adherents. An Irishman by birth, easily irritated and even flustered by the attacks of his opponents, he was yet entirely loyal to his friends. If he had a real veneration for the aristocrats amongst whom he moved, he also had a great belief in himself, and this frequently enabled him to make a stand as a champion of unpopular causes. In 1774, at the age of 45, he was at the height of his powers.

Although Burke's representation of Bristol comprised only a small fraction of his parliamentary career, it presents him in an unaccustomed role. Since the political outlook of Lords Verney and Rockingham largely coincided with that of Burke, he was to a considerable extent a free agent when he sat for their pocket boroughs; but at Bristol, with its broad franchise, the number,

wealth and political consciousness of his constituents introduced a new factor into Burke's position as a member of Parliament. Many of the citizens were fully alive to the chief political and economic issues of the day, especially those which affected their livelihood, the city's trade. Burke was thus in a position not simply of moulding public opinion—as was his wont—but of either truckling to it or suffering the consequences. This pamphlet tries to explain how and why he chose the latter course.

### **Burke as Candidate for Bristol.**

In 1774 events were moving towards a crisis in British history, for the American colonies were seething with discontent. This was a matter of the deepest concern for the people of Bristol which was then the second city and port of the kingdom, for her wealth was largely derived from her colonial trade, notably with North America and the West Indies. The merchants had thus acquired great prosperity which they naturally did not want to lose.

Britain's great political and commercial rival in the eighteenth century was France, but the conquest of Canada during the Seven Years' War had largely removed any danger of French attack upon the British settlements in America. With the end of the war in 1763, the prime minister, George Grenville, decided upon a policy of retrenchment that the colonists should help to pay off the large national debt incurred during the war and should contribute towards the upkeep of garrisons stationed in the colonies for their defence. The result was the Sugar and Stamp Acts of 1764-5.

Previously the basis of British policy had been that the colonies existed for the benefit of the Mother Country, which was therefore entitled to regulate their trade through such devices as the Navigation Laws. Grenville's Sugar Act of 1764 was a new principle in that it imposed customs duties not merely in restraint of trade but as a means of raising a revenue. It was followed in 1765 by the better-known Stamp Act which imposed further taxes upon the colonists for the same purpose. These two measures so provoked the anger of the Americans that they refused to trade with Britain, causing great losses to the British merchants and manufacturers. In 1766 Grenville's successor as prime minister, Lord Rockingham, bowed to the storm of protests and decided to repeal the Stamp Act, but at the same time Parliament passed a Declaratory Act which affirmed its basic right to tax the colonists if it so wished.

Burke had then just become Rockingham's private secretary and had entered Parliament as member for Wendover. Henceforth

he remained a loyal and enthusiastic supporter of the Rockingham Whigs. The latter was only one of several groups of politicians who called themselves Whigs but whose policies were quite different from one another. It has been seen that Grenville and his supporters believed in American taxation; the Rockingham group, including Burke, believed in Britain's right of taxation but thought it might be inexpedient to use it; another more radical group led by William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, distinguished between the right of Parliament to legislate for the colonies—which they admitted—and its right to tax—which they denied. On the other side, George III and his ministerial supporters, some of whom were described by their contemporaries as 'the King's Friends', wished to assert the undoubted and unlimited supremacy of Parliament over the colonies, and eventually, of course, this led to the outbreak of the War of Independence in 1775.

Paradoxically, it was Charles Townshend, chancellor of the exchequer in Chatham's ministry which had succeeded Rockingham's in 1766, who revived the dispute in 1767 by introducing taxes on tea and other colonial imports, at a time when Chatham lay prostrated by illness. The colonists again boycotted trade with Britain, and in 1770 Lord North's ministry repealed all the duties save that on tea. It was the Tea Act of 1773, allowing the import of East Indian tea direct to America, which finally sparked off the conflict. In retaliation for a colonial demonstration against the Act, known as the Boston Tea Party, Lord North's government passed a series of Coercion Acts, which made hostilities virtually inevitable.

There were, of course, many other issues then being discussed in the Bristol clubs, coffee houses and taverns, and on the Exchange, but it was the American question which dominated the political scene. It explains the rather unexpected dissolution in September 1774, when the Parliament elected in 1768 had yet another year to run. Lord North's government wished to avert criticism of its policy which it anticipated would follow an impending joint meeting of the colonies—the Continental Congress.

Until the Reform Act of 1832 the members of Parliament elected for each borough were chosen in many cases by a mere handful of voters. Bristol was one of the principal exceptions, having an electorate numbering about 5,000—the third largest in the kingdom. The voters comprised the forty shilling freeholders and freemen. Freedom could be acquired by birth, purchase, apprenticeship, or marriage to the daughter of a freeman.

In 1774, the retiring members of Parliament for Bristol were Lord Clare, an Irish peer who had been first elected in 1754, and

Matthew Brickdale, a Bristol merchant, elected in 1768. Although Clare is often labelled a Whig and Brickdale a Tory, their policies were almost indistinguishable. They both normally supported the government of the day and had made themselves unpopular in Bristol by supporting coercive measures against the colonists. Their candidatures had been sponsored by the two Bristol political clubs; the Union Club (Whig) meeting at the Bush tavern and the Steadfast Society (Tory) at the White Lion. In 1756 these two bodies agreed that each would support the other's candidates for the next three elections, thus avoiding the expense of a contest; a further agreement was made in 1766 to cover the election of 1768 only. If, as seems probable, the 1766 agreement superseded that of 1756, neither agreement was still operative for the 1774 election. However, for some years there had been dissatisfaction at the system whereby the city's members of Parliament were virtually elected by the committees of the two political clubs. Since the emergence of John Wilkes as the champion of popular liberty in 1763, a radical movement had developed in many parts of Britain. In Bristol it was organised as the Independent Society under the leadership of Samuel Peach, a wealthy merchant, and his son-in-law, Henry Cruger, but drawing its support largely from the artisan class. Its programme included the safeguarding of civil liberties; a vigilant scrutiny of public expenditure; the prevention of compromised elections; the repeal of the Septennial Act; a limitation of the number of placemen in Parliament, and the exclusion of pensioners and contractors from it; and the maintenance of a conciliatory policy towards the American colonies. This body had tried to 'instruct' Clare and Brickdale to vote in support of the reform of Parliament, but getting no satisfaction, it soon after adopted Cruger as its prospective candidate to oppose them at the next election.

Henry Cruger was an American merchant from New York who had come to Bristol in 1757 to take charge of a branch of his family's business. Though he had been regarded as a Tory, he was a member of a Bristol deputation sent to Parliament in 1766 to ask for the repeal of the Stamp Act. He was then elected to the Bristol Common Council<sup>1</sup> and became a leader of the local radical movement. The radicals at first intended putting forward as their second candidate Cruger's business partner, John Mallard, but they finally decided that as it was unlikely that they could win both seats, it would be more realistic to nominate as the second candidate a representative of one of the other Whig groups that were opposed to the government. It was customary for one of the Bristol

1. The modern City Council.



members of Parliament to be a local merchant (e.g., Brickdale); the other, a politician of national reputation but with a special knowledge of economic policy (e.g., Clare). The name of Edmund Burke was therefore suggested. By 1774 he had won a national reputation as "the brains and mouthpiece of the Rockingham party", which was the more moderate and aristocratic wing of the opposition. His speeches in Parliament, his political pamphlets, especially **Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents** (1769), and his appointment as British agent for the province of New York, all made him a suitable candidate—though it was perhaps surprising that the invitation should have come through Rev. Dr. Thomas Wilson, a leading radical, with whose policy Burke was wholly out of sympathy.

At this time he was already looking around for another constituency because his seat at Wendover was no longer available. The prestige to be gained by representing Bristol made him inclined to accept the offer of nomination, provided he could be assured of adequate support both in men and money to fight the election. But when the dissolution of Parliament was announced on 30 September 1774 and the adoption meetings were held, a meeting of the Bristol radicals refused to endorse Burke's nomination and resolved that Cruger should stand as the only opposition candidate. The rift between the rival opposition groups was thus revealed at this early stage.

Meanwhile Burke had been in correspondence with Richard Champion, a well-known porcelain manufacturer and merchant, who thenceforward became his most energetic and loyal supporter in Bristol. Champion was ably seconded by Joseph Harford, another prominent Bristol merchant. Champion was vehemently opposed to both the policy of the radicals and the person of Cruger, and in his efforts on Burke's behalf he even tried to do a deal with the government candidates to secure Burke's election and Cruger's rejection. Such chicanery was not uncommon in eighteenth century politics.

In those days the voting at elections was not secret and in the case of Bristol was often spread out over several weeks. The votes were recorded publicly, and the record of them can often still be consulted in the Poll Books of each election.

The poll opened on 7 October 1774 with two government candidates, Clare and Brickdale, and one opposition candidate, Cruger. But Lord Clare soon found that the number of his supporters had dwindled, and at the conclusion of the first day's voting, he withdrew. Champion and Harford at once tried to

mobilise support for Burke, and joined by some of Clare's former supporters, they eventually persuaded the returning officers (the sheriffs) that it was in order to nominate Burke on the second day of the poll. Burke was then in Yorkshire, but an urgent summons was sent for him to come to Bristol, where he arrived three days later. Meanwhile, a joint committee of supporters of Cruger and Burke met and failed to reach agreement for there to be a joint election platform, although some of the expenses were shared. Both candidates maintained separate election committees, agents, and managers, and their supporters worked in almost open rivalry.

In those days it was rather unusual for there to be electioneering speeches; the candidates simply canvassed the voters and issued election leaflets, broadsides and squibs. This election was notable as being "the first instance of a great orator and statesman using the Platform for the purpose of bringing himself into frank and unreserved communication with the people."<sup>2</sup> On Burke's arrival in Bristol, he at once mounted the hustings and made a short speech in which he spotlighted the American problem and emphasised the necessity of solving it, but he did not refer to any of the other controversial points in the programme of his radical colleague, Cruger. That was Burke's only recorded speech in an election campaign lasting nearly a month. During that time, each candidate made strenuous efforts to produce sufficient voters to keep the poll open. Numerous squibs and broadsides were issued, many of them of a scurrilous, personal nature, but despite the imminence of the American crisis, that question proved to be only a minor issue in this pamphlet warfare. Burke was specially attacked on the ground, quite untrue, that he was a Catholic: at a time when religious prejudice waxed strong, the cry of "Jesuit!" could be very damaging. Secondly, his disagreement with the policy of the radicals was strongly emphasised by the supporters of both his rival candidates, Brickdale and Cruger.

After twenty-three days of voting, the poll was closed with the following result:

Henry Cruger 3,565; Edmund Burke 2,707; Matthew Brickdale 2,456; Lord Clare 283.

Cruger and Burke were declared elected. As his private correspondence shows, Burke was highly elated at the result.

When the candidates made speeches of thanks to the assembled crowd, Cruger simply stated his belief "that the electors have a right to instruct their members" and that he would feel

2. H. Jephson, *The Platform. Its Rise and Progress* (1892) ii. 91.

bound to accept their directions.<sup>3</sup> Burke joined issue with him on this item of radical policy, and in a long speech he sought to refute it. He declared :

Certainly, gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him . . . But his unbiassed opinion, his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to to you, to any man or set of men living . . . Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement . . .

Authoritative instructions, mandates issued, which the member is bound blindly and implicitly to obey, to vote and argue for, though contrary to the clearest conviction of his judgement and conscience—these are things utterly unknown to the laws of this land, and which arise from a fundamental mistake of the whole order and tenor of our constitution. Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests . . . but a deliberate assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole . . . You choose a member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not member of Bristol, he is a member of Parliament.<sup>4</sup>

This speech epitomised the policy of the Rockingham Whigs whose spokesman Burke was. It has been acclaimed by some of the greatest British historians, and is quoted even today in the discussion of constitutional issues. But in view of the irreconcilable differences which subsequently developed between the two Bristol members, this part of Burke's address may well have sounded to his more astute hearers like the tocsin of old, ringing out a warning note of tumults and troubles yet to come.

Although the successful candidates joined forces for a victory celebration, two repercussions of the election also helped to widen the gulf between them. The defeated candidate, Brickdale, petitioned Parliament against the result, claiming that the election was irregular and that he ought to have been returned. Cruger refused to join Burke in putting forward a united defence, by briefing the same counsel and sharing the expense, and there were frequent bickerings between their supporters before the hearing. Nevertheless, Brickdale's petition was rejected and their election duly confirmed. Even greater complications arose when Cruger's

3. He did not say "Ditto to Mr. Burke!" as has sometimes been alleged.

4. *Works*, i. 447.

friends arranged that both the Bristol members should be escorted into the city in triumph after their election had been confirmed by Parliament. Although the arrangements had been advertised in the local press, Burke flatly refused to take part in "such a foolish piece of Pageantry" because he considered it his duty to attend the debates in the House of Commons. His supporters were divided on the issue, and to Burke's chagrin, several of them turned out to greet Cruger. Burke's absence did nothing to ease the tension between himself and his colleague; it probably made people feel that their new member was rather aloof—as indeed he proved to be.

Thus Bristol, almost alone of any constituency at this election, changed its representation to the advantage of America and to the discomfiture of Lord North's government. In reporting the Bristol result to George III, the prime minister described it as "the worst news," but the subsequent conduct of the two Bristol members in Parliament was to belie Lord North's greatest fears.

### **Burke as Member for Bristol. (i) The American War.**

Although both Burke and Cruger were critical of the policies of Lord North's government, they failed to support one another either on the opposition benches in Parliament, where they advocated differing solutions to the American problem, or in their constituency, where the antagonisms of their supporters prevented the growth of strong local opposition to the government.

In the House of Commons, Lord North usually had a working majority of 100-150, and the disunity of the several opposition groups added further strength to his position. Moreover, public opinion was generally apathetic to politics but held instead an optimistic complacency. The merchants were in closer touch with overseas opinion than a ministry which derived its main strength from the landed gentry and the personal supporters of George III and Lord North. It was, therefore, in the merchants' interests to maintain friendly relations with America in order to avert the struggle, but they were not powerful enough to make an effective protest until the threatened boycott of British goods came into operation at the end of 1774.

In view of the weakness of the opposition, Burke's parliamentary reputation and abilities ensured that he should frequently be heard on nearly all the important issues that arose during the six years of his representation of Bristol in Parliament. But because, for the first time since 1754, both the Bristol members were sitting on the opposition benches, they took a less significant part in the routine business and committee work of the House. Their con-

stituents were given neither accurate forecasts of impending legislation, nor attractive pickings of the fruits of patronage. Thus Burke and Cruger were at a considerable disadvantage both personally and in the eyes of their constituents, many of whom contrasted the new régime with the golden days of Lord Clare's representation of the city.

Burke's parliamentary activities were therefore largely confined for three principal functions : (1) formulating and mobilising support for modifications in the government's general policy; (2) presenting and advocating opposition petitions and remonstrances; and (3) ensuring that the interests of his constituents were safeguarded as far as was possible within the limits referred to above.

He was very early made aware that the last named duty was considered by the Bristol freemen to be the most important service he could render them. At the opening of the session he received an application from six of the principal American merchants of Bristol to obtain an amendment to a clause in the Corn Law of 1773 which placed a heavy duty on Indian corn. The merchants had urged the Master of the Society of Merchant Venturers to convene a Hall to discuss the matter, but the Master was Brickdale's brother-in-law, and declined to move without the approval of the Standing Committee, on which the ministerialists had a majority. The merchants accordingly wrote to Burke direct. At the instigation of Champion, Burke took immediate action and was able to get an amending Act passed, for which he received a public letter of thanks. His correspondence reveals the great importance attached by his constituents to this very minor matter. One of his Quaker supporters wrote :

Thou are very well aware how little Minds are Affected and that it frequently happens popular Applause is gained more by trifles, than by things of much greater Consequence. The Indian Corn Bill, for instance, stands as much to thy Credit, as if thou had a great deal more trouble to effect the Business.<sup>5</sup>

Burke himself told Champion, however :

I hope, if ever I merit your thanks, that you will have no occasion to distinguish my local services from my public conduct.

In other words, he continued to regard his parliamentary duties—as a sort of opposition whip—as his most urgent political duty. Accordingly, trading upon the dissatisfaction of the merchants at

5. James Harford to Burke, 2 March 1775, from the Burke MSS in the Wentworth Woodhouse collection of the Sheffield Central Public Library (quoted by kind permission of the Earl Fitzwilliam and his Trustees of the Wentworth Woodhouse Settled Estates).

the loss of their chief markets because of the American trade boycott, Burke organised a campaign of petitions to Parliament from most of the large towns complaining of the government's American policy. When, in January 1775, he forwarded the draft of a strongly-worded petition for consideration by the Bristol merchants, the delaying tactics of the Master and committee of the Society of Merchant Venturers bade fair to secure its rejection, for a second Hall (at which non-members were present to ensure a pro-Burke majority) had to be convened before the petition was adopted, and yet a third Hall to appoint the deputation to take it to London.

In contrast, Cruger's Bristol supporters, faithful to their radical creed, worked independently through a public meeting rather than through any of the existing closed organisations. Their petition was as moderate in tone as Cruger's maiden speech in Parliament had been a month previously. It provoked Champion's derision as being "more as if they were petitioning an eastern Tyrant than a British house of Commons," but he "got four or five lines of the conclusion added w<sup>ch</sup> gave it a little spirit."<sup>6</sup>

All this activity proved nugatory. When they reached Parliament, the Bristol petitions like those from London and many other large towns were quietly shelved, despite Burke's plea that they should be given serious consideration. Nothing daunted, he wrote again to the Society of Merchant Venturers urging further action, but there was no response. The initiative then passed to the government, and despite eloquent speeches by Burke and others, Parliament continued its coercive policy with an Act to restrain the overseas trade of the New England states.

Burke did not, however, take this lying down, for in March 1775 he introduced his own conciliation proposals which in effect demanded the repeal of all coercive laws in order to remove the grounds of the American complaints. With dramatic simplification, he declared in his speech :

The proposition is peace. Not peace through the medium of war; not peace to be hunted through the labyrinth of intricate and endless negotiations; not peace to arise out of universal discord, fomented from principle, in all parts of the empire; not peace to depend on the juridical determination of perplexing questions; or the precise marking of shadowy boundaries of a complex government. It is simple peace; sought in its natural course, and in its ordinary haunts. It is peace sought in the spirit of peace; and laid in principles purely pacific.<sup>7</sup>

6. Champion to Burke, 14 Jan. 1775, from the Champion Letter-book in the Manuscripts Division of New York Public Library.

7. *Works*, i. 453-4.

Burke's oratory proved fruitless, but his speech was printed and circulated in Bristol among his constituents, and it is still studied and quoted today.

Unfortunately, his relations with his colleague, Cruger, continued to deteriorate. In May 1775 in a letter to one of his relatives, Cruger described Burke as crafty, selfish and cunning, as well as neglectful of the interests of New York—for which state Burke was British agent. In August Burke seemed to prove him right by refusing to join the other colonial agents in presenting to the King a petition of the Continental Congress regarding American policy—much to Cruger's disgust.

The first year of Burke's representation of Bristol ended with one of his rare visits to his constituency in August 1775, just after the outbreak of war in America. He visited Cruger's house to try to explain his position over the American petition but the visit only produced further acrimony. He also tried to stimulate his own supporters. One outcome of this was their attempt to wreck a public meeting of government supporters which had been called by the Mayor on 28 September 1775 to adopt a loyal address directed largely against the American colonists. This episode produced a violent press campaign against the Bristol opposition leaders, and especially against Burke who had written publicly in support of the efforts of the hecklers. 'Obediah Steadfast' categorically informed him that he now had "no expectation of being chosen at a future election."<sup>8</sup>

The remaining war years were for Burke a depressing experience. In Parliament the duty of the opposition is to oppose, and this Burke sought to do at every opportunity, but his speeches made little impact upon the government. So exasperating did he find the situation that for several months during the 1776-7 session he, with most of the Rockingham Whigs, seceded from Parliament whenever American affairs were debated. For this policy he was so much criticised that he issued a pamphlet to explain his actions: **A Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol**. No further petitions against the government's war policy were sent from Bristol, where loyal addresses and public subscriptions in support of the war were much more popular. Burke made only one more visit to his constituency—in 1776—but he still tried to satisfy his constituents' demands by attending to their local interests. For example, as the facsimile letter on p. 2 shows, he succeeded in getting amendments made to the Bill to Prohibit all Trade and Intercourse with the American Colonies so as to meet certain objections by the Bristol merchants.

8. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 28 Oct. 1775.

From then on, however, the Society of Merchant Venturers frequently approached the members of Parliament for other towns, besides Burke, whenever they had any important parliamentary business on hand. This greatly irritated him. For a brief period in 1779 Cruger appeared more cooperative, but the two were never cordial. Burke evidently was suspicious of Cruger's loyalty towards his fellow-countrymen in America, but it is not clear whether he had any knowledge either that Cruger was supplying the War Office with information regarding the military and economic situation in America, or that he was receiving an annual pension of £500 from the British government.

Not until a petitioning movement was begun by the Yorkshire Association in 1779-80 did the political tide turn in Burke's favour—by which time other difficulties confronted him. A substantial number of Bristol citizens who had previously opposed him came out in support of the Yorkshire movement. The Common Council, on which Burke's supporters had secured a majority, petitioned Parliament at Harford's instigation "to enquire into the Expenditure of the Public Money, and correct Abuses therein." But there the enthusiasm of the citizens stopped. Although some of them took the lead at the county meetings held for the same purpose at Gloucester and Wells, no committee of correspondence on the Yorkshire model was set up in Bristol itself, and Burke was clearly disappointed that his constituents gave no support to his attempts at Economic Reform, i.e., to reduce the number of sinecure posts in the government. The parliamentary opposition was still divided: the radicals—Cruger among them—wishing for a more thorough-going reform of Parliament than the Rockingham Whigs would countenance. So although in March 1780 Dunning's famous motion regarding the influence of the crown was duly passed, Burke's Economical Reform Bill was lost, and the ministry survived the most powerful attack to which it had yet been subjected.

#### (ii) **Other Issues.**

During 1778-80 Burke's relations with his constituents deteriorated sharply because of differences in policy on three specific questions.

In 1778 he flagrantly went counter to their wishes in supporting proposals to relax the Irish trade laws. At that time Ireland was in an unhappy plight. Her agriculture was extremely backward, while her trade, struggling against crippling restrictions, was further burdened by new duties imposed during the American War. Under the mercantilist system, she was treated commercially almost as a foreign country—a policy which the Bristol merchants whole-



heartedly endorsed, for they believed that Irish participation in colonial trade would gravely prejudice their own interests.

As soon as the Society of Merchant Venturers heard about the proposals, it at once began methodical preparations to combat this threat to its interests. Not since the Stamp Act crisis had it moved with such alacrity and thoroughness: open meetings, petitions and deputations to Parliament from the Society and the Common Council, approaches to other M.Ps., circular letters to every city and borough in the kingdom, correspondence in the Bristol press—the whole apparatus of opposition was deployed. Some of Burke's closest friends such as Harford and Noble were among his critics. Although they warned him privately of the effect of his policy, Burke declined to visit Bristol to face his critics, but instead wrote numerous letters lecturing them on the moral issues involved and the need for an unprejudiced approach to the problem. Despite the cogency of his arguments, he placed himself in a difficult position: himself an Irishman he was allying himself with Lord North's ministry whose general policy he opposed, against the whole mercantile interest to whose support he owed his seat. Popular clamour delayed any relaxation of the Irish trade laws until 1780, when the threat of revolt caused Parliament reluctantly to succumb, but Burke's part in the matter was not forgotten in Bristol.

The second question over which Burke differed from his constituents arose from a move to relax the penalties for debt. Under the existing law, debtors were liable to indefinite confinement and consequently the gaols were crowded. In 1780 Burke supported a Bill to transfer the duty of enforcing judgments for debt from the plaintiff to the judges, but even this limited reform provoked an outcry in which some of Burke's supporters joined. They considered the proposals would encourage fraud, endanger property and undermine credit. The opposition was on a smaller scale than that provoked by the Irish Bills but it used similar methods. This time, Burke did not dismiss the objections out of hand, but used every endeavour to meet them. The Bill did not pass, but Burke was most unfairly subjected to gross misrepresentation and scurrility for his part in it.

Thirdly, Burke collided with his constituents on the question of religious toleration. In view of his Catholic connections, Burke was generally cautious in voicing publicly opinions which might be misconstrued, although in his private correspondence he was a zealous advocate of religious toleration. His support for the Protestant Dissenters Relief Act of 1779 provoked no comment in Bristol, where there was a strong nonconformist element. Bills to relieve

English and Irish Catholics from the oppressive penal code also owed much of their success to Burke's unostentatious efforts behind the scenes. But when a similar measure was proposed for Scotland, Lord George Gordon incited fanatical Protestants to plunder and burn Catholic churches and houses. Burke then came out into the open with a speech strongly critical of the rioters. The trouble spread to London where Burke was a special target because of a quite untrue allegation that he had seconded the Relief Bill. Throughout the fantastic scenes of June 1780 when London was under mob rule, Burke played a courageous part. Bristol escaped any such disturbances but Burke's support for the Act was criticised by his constituents on the grounds that it had been passed too hastily and that the Catholics were "enemies of liberty and to our free constitution".<sup>9</sup> Burke's thinking on this subject (as on those of Irish trade and insolvent debtors) was appreciably in advance of his time.

### **Burke rejected by Bristol.**

Like its predecessor, the Parliament elected in 1774 lasted only for six of the seven years permitted by the Septennial Act. In the spring of 1780, in anticipation of an early dissolution, three candidates were already in the field in Bristol: Cruger, Brickdale, and another ministerial candidate, Richard Combe—a Bristol merchant, previously M.P. for Aldeburgh.

In contrast, Burke's position was most uncertain. He had not visited Bristol at all for four years and had virtually no electoral organisation to back him. So doubtful was his candidature that rumour linked Harford's name with that of Cruger as the opposition candidates, but Harford declined. Finally, a small committee of Burke's supporters was formed, and in response to urgent appeals, Burke was persuaded to visit his constituency in August 1780. Attempts were then made to buy off the opposition. Cruger was offered £2,000 to withdraw, but not surprisingly his committee rejected these proposals. However, a meeting at which Burke's withdrawal was to have been announced became so infected by enthusiasm that, ignoring financial and organisational difficulties, it became instead an adoption meeting. Apart from his adoption speech—a magnificent apologia for his stewardship during the past six years—Burke also issued a fourteen-page pamphlet, **A Review of Mr. Burke's Conduct . . .**, which sought to disprove the thesis that the Bristol freemen could not be satisfactorily represented in Parliament by a member of the opposition.

9. *Works*, ii. 163.

Two days later, at the opening of the poll, one of the ministerial candidates, Combe, died, and Burke made a further attempt to compromise with Brickdale. But his opponents, rightly confident of victory, adopted another candidate, Sir Henry Lippincott, in place of Combe and the poll proceeded. On the first day, Burke polled so poorly that with the unanimous advice of his friends, he decided to withdraw. This he did in a dignified speech which included his oft-quoted reference to Combe's death: "What shadows we are and what shadows we pursue."<sup>10</sup> The election then proceeded, Lippincott and Brickdale gaining an overwhelming victory over Cruger, while Burke was found a seat for Lord Rockingham's pocket borough of Malton.

Many factors contributed to Burke's defeat, but the main reason was that he made no attempt to work with Cruger at Westminster or to maintain a joint electoral organisation with him in Bristol. Fundamental differences in outlook between the two men and their supporters might have precluded an alliance on any terms, but it was never even attempted. Burke's lack of an effective election committee contrasted sharply with his three opponents who all had the advantage of being well-known local men. Two of them were also fighting on a united platform. Moreover, after the outbreak of war, opposition was deemed unpatriotic, while many of Burke's principal supporters were financially impoverished or made bankrupt by it. The other issues for which Burke had been criticised (Ireland, debtors, Catholics) merely put the issue beyond doubt.

In 1780, Burke did not entirely sever his connection with Bristol. The abstention of his supporters at that election ensured Cruger's resounding defeat—to the unconcealed satisfaction of Burke and his friends. After Burke's withdrawal, but even before the 1780 election campaign was concluded, he sought to remedy his lack of electoral organisation by supervising the resuscitation of the Union Club; but because of his antagonism towards the radicals, he made a strenuous, though unsuccessful, attempt to exclude all Cruger's supporters from membership of it. When a bye-election occurred only three months later, Burke's former supporters had come to recognise the folly of opposition disunity. His possible candidature was considered but not proceeded with, and his friends finally supported Cruger. Although Burke continued to have some tenuous links with Bristol and its citizens almost until his death in 1797, his political influence there after 1784 was slight. In his declining years he must often have re-echoed C. J. Fox's description of "that rascally city".

10. *Ibid.*, ii. 171.

My dear Champion,

I wrote to Paul Farr last Night to give him an account of what I had done, & that I had shewd no remissness in any Business that belongs to you & him or any other of our good friends. I saw, from the moment of seeing Lord North, that a personal application would be the best method of proceeding, especially when the Bill was so near its final determination. If a few honest men may save themselves from the sweeping & comprehensive ruin of this most wicked & sacrilegious of all measures, I shall be happy; though it cost me a Visit to the Minister. He, I believe, is not the author of it. It is generally thought to be the manufacture of Sandwich. They are now debating it on the second reading in the house of Lords. I have this one day dined at home. We are now drinking your health & that of y<sup>r</sup> family and our friends in Bristol which we all most sincerely wish. I am ever with great affection

My dear Champion

always y<sup>rs</sup>

Edm Burke

Westm<sup>r</sup> Dec. 15. 1775.

My dear Champion,

I wrote to ~~you~~ ~~you~~ last night to give him an account of what I had done, & that I also should be very happy in my opinion that it might be ~~the~~ ~~the~~ of some good friends, & for the sake of every kind of ~~it~~ that a personal application would be the best method of proceeding, especially when the bill was so near its final determination. If a few honest men say so then, I shall be very happy to see the sweeping & comprehensive case of this most wicked & unwholesome of all measures, I shall be happy; though it will not be fit to the Minister. He, I believe, is not the author of it. This generally thought to be the manufacture of Lord Sandwich. They are now debating it on the second reading in the house of lords. I am this morning in bed at home. We are now drinking your health at 10 o'clock, & some friends and I will be all most sincerely yours

I am with great affection  
yours  
Edmund Burke

always &c.  
Edmund Burke

Ms. A. 9. 2. 15. 1775.

Letter of Edmund Burke to Richard Champion, 15 December 1775.

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